



*Castles and
Islands*

Castles and Islands

JOSHUA EDWARDS

for Lynn

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Liang Editions

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Across a continent imaginary
Because it cannot be discovered now

— Laura Riding Jackson

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FLAG OF CONVENIENCE

Friends,

I meant to describe everything
to you in letters, but as you know
I was overwhelmed and only sent
postcards with monuments

embarrassed by impressions.
I couldn't describe the swimming fish
or flying birds, the descending sun or
holy moon. I had no substantial thoughts

about anything besides the ocean,
which reminded me of artichokes.
I saw a thousand new types of plants
and didn't learn any of their names.

Even beneath skies of so many stars
I'd never known before, I was dumb
and discourteous as a cloud.
Now back to what is nearly home,

there are some fragments coalescing
and images getting clearer: a moving
sheet of ice, layers of later gardens,
two cords of wood, a small fire.















PREMONITION

The sea is almost the ocean
as it is cooled by crowds of dreamy ships.

Green water falling in a desert meditation:
landscape if there were such a land.

LOST RIVERS

Juan Díaz de Solís sailed into what
is now Río de la Plata and called
it Mar Dulce (literally: Sweet Sea)
because of its salinity and size
(over a hundred miles wide at the mouth).

I sometimes think of this when I travel
and find out that something I saw was not
what I thought it was, which happens often,
since I have chosen an occupation
that demands I take many journeys and
know very little. (Or perhaps it was
the job that chose me, for my weaknesses.)

For example, one night I found myself
disoriented in the capital
of a small island nation in Asia.
I had only been there a few days and
the map in my possession was covered
with an alphabet I couldn't fathom.

That same morning, it had seemed sensible
to explore the city with such a map.
Perhaps I could even learn a few words.

For a while I thought I knew where I was,
or at least where I was going, until
I sat down for a meal (which cost me next
to nothing or else an arm and a leg)
and drank too much of the local spirit.

After that, I simply walked in the most
beautiful directions. A little while
after sunset I came upon a ditch
and decided to follow it toward
the source of its narrow stream of water.
Somehow I knew it would take me back home.

Several hours later, I was more lost
than ever (even though the city still
surrounded me), and so I hailed a cab.

The driver spoke my language perfectly.
He told me I'd ended up in a place
seldom frequented by visitors,
but if I'd followed the river downstream
I would have eventually arrived
at the port. When I asked him which river,
he said the one I'd been standing beside.

DAY OF THE DEAD (I)

Was it really that good, Horace –
the cup of wine followed
by a deep summer daysleep?

And when
did your age (as you speak
of it) become the distant past?

After the dust of your dreams
was scattered by morning's
ordinary light, did you follow
your hunger to a fruit tree?

Or were you the sort of bearded man
who takes time to shave his neck?

NOVEMBER

Constellation lost
by the whole of truth, galactic
in its obscurity.

* * *

Drowning to sing of cruises, the voice
out of Eden asks, "What sort of tide is this?"

* * *

A rusty nail like a sword in the dirt,
like a different sort of sleep, between
a dream of leisure and work's shadow.

* * *

If only to fully direct one's mind at a thing,
to feel the pain of a newly-discovered
word that pushes thinking beyond
the body's quarters and into open time.





THE LAMP OF SACRIFICE

You and I know when
one keen pyramid with
wedge sublime pavilions

the upended surgeon's grave.
We've smelled that dirt.
In the reader's unwashed

eye there's a broussard
hacking his way
to a proper definition

for the word after lifetime.
Thus the tan and muscled
figure knocking at our door.

Don't open it, my dear.
He may be just a shadow
but the door itself

is dangerous and to stay
with me forever in this
domestic rank would make

an engineer so proud.
Or else let's go be useless
someplace: the tropics

as adornment where
we may disappear into
an attending atmosphere.

THE LAMP OF TRUTH

Setting sun, moon rising
to light the two buildings
as structures might be lit:

columns bright against
a winter sky. Grey smoke
climbs in harmonic braids

from the stovepipes of
lesser buildings. A figure
present in the landscape

confirms by its presence
that knowledge begins
when belief finds form.

Another form of belief
ends in another place,
abstracted, somewhere

in the horizon's empty
space, as a faint shape,
some painted frame

or else a static square
of vapor. The winter sky
like a pane of grey glass:

those buildings there,
secured against shadows
as suns rise, moons set.

THE LAMP OF POWER

Gathering and governing,
the eye like a barrel of oil,
a potted plant, a column

in a field of many grasses.
Lion among lions, sculptor
of idols, prophet of hunger,

plinth of shadow cutting
across pillar and forest,
the eye as enormous wall

that divides a landscape:
majesty and judgement,
horizon from dilemma.

The bird upon the eye,
the eye beneath the bird.
When sunshine at an angle

specific to a range of days
relieves the burden of
surfaces, the azure skies

and distant palaces surpass
the calm with questions
of survival. The only places

to end this are in a cave
or on the ocean, where
the eye is poor and pure.

THE LAMP OF BEAUTY

I remained in the darkness
to find freedom but shadows
filled with beauty pierced

my mind and I had to go back.
I have trouble with things
that are beautiful. Crystals

are pure arrangements,
the sea is impossible, delicate
flowers and arabesques

have the gravity of lightness.
The mysterious earth expands
into a sublime heaven, music

is a fight with jewelled swords.
I think of beauty and time
is lost. If only it would teach

us something, not merely
be regarded. I am a gargoyle.
Although I do not see color

(the rainbow is a zebra), color
can see me. Natural beauty,
human beauty, beautiful forms,

and even the ugly monster of
beautiful poetry disturb me.
I suppose nothing can be done.

THE LAMP OF LIFE

The inseparably composed
sweet and vivid energies
of mind and imagination

will be lost among bones.
Reader, is life a pickpocket?
Is it a temple for or the apex

of struggling? Is vitality art?
What is between the living
and the dead? A little door?

A terminal? A hair's breadth
of anything? Reader, readers
vanish. Every reader is thus

only a dream of the reader.
Think of the eleventh century.
Imagine a Byzantine stranger.

Imagine the fearlessness of
medieval children. Heartless,
they had to love everything.

We read poetry, but people
change. Look, there is
a memory! It is lifeless.

Perhaps the question to ask
is this: While living, how much
of the world vanishes away?

THE LAMP OF MEMORY

The writer looks back, year
by year, star after star, ever
and anon. "I came out singing,

sailing, and gliding on beauty."
The writer remembers
the river, hills, and flowers.

"I lived like a landscape with
a large glacier in its midst."
Let us imagine him in stone,

devoted to a life of posterity
and the idea of the future,
watching the passing waves

of humanity, outlasting the world.
"I believe in objects more
than subjects. Art is the failure

of the subject. Objects are true."
His mind becomes itself a subject,
subordinate to a twisted sense

of historical proportion, clinging
to sublimity and preservation.
"I think of my life as a skeleton

and modern times as a funeral.
I belong to the future, like a green
sea, like the sun, like the sky."

THE LAMP OF OBEDIENCE

Phantom of phantoms, universe
of darkness, river of heaven.
Evil and beauty, sun and moon,

art and dreams. Power as law,
laws as nation, nations as work.
The garden is strange sometimes.

Marvelous things are about
to come to pass as language
changes and the character

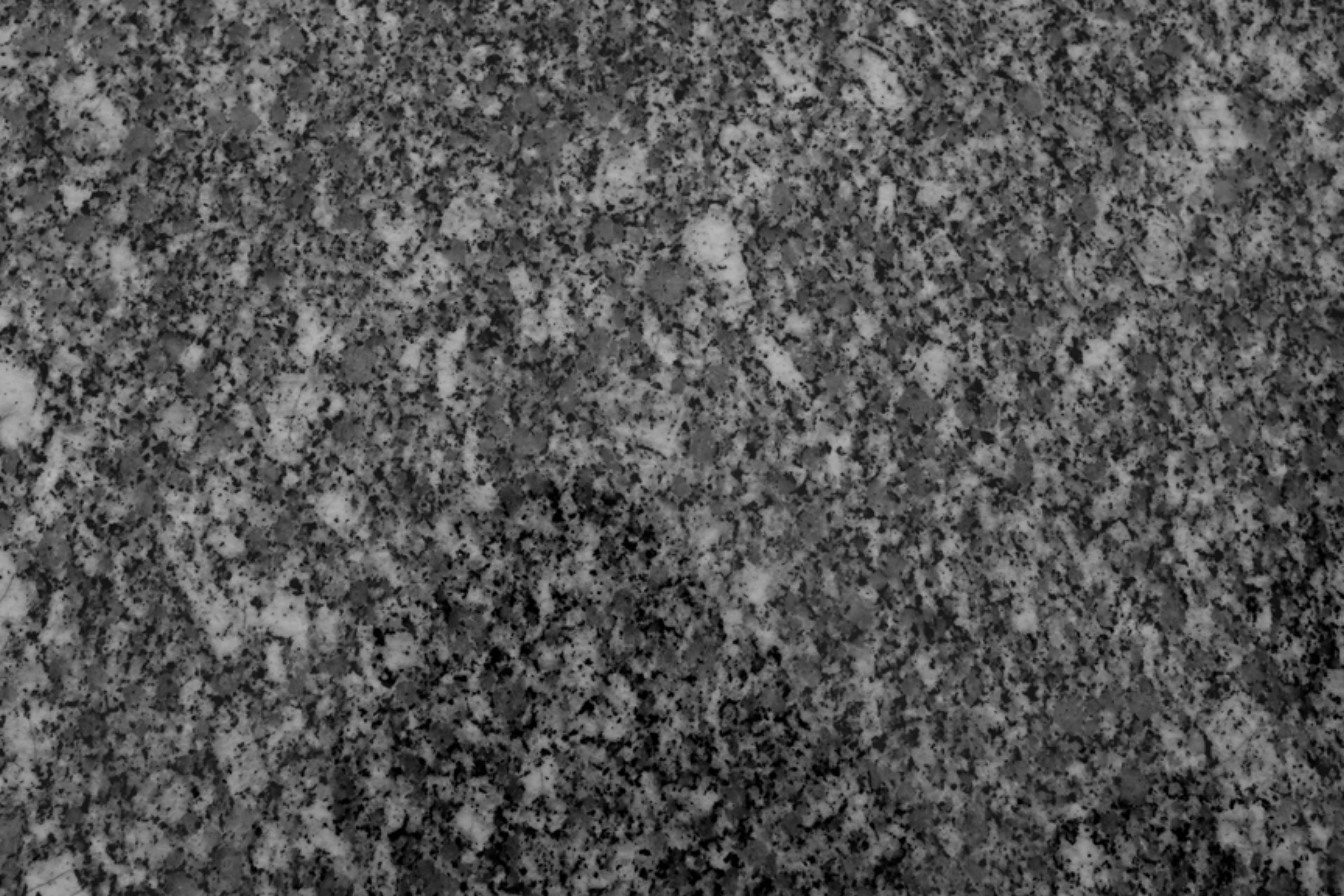
of the world is harmonized.
Wild lives and recklessness,
idleness and pleasure, another

place and one another. More
home with less habit, better
qualities of light, lovely days

on the earth. Travelers living
in a school, photographers in
a landscape, lovers in loving.

The snow flakes fall into drifts.
I am exhausted from dreaming
and have stared too long at a book:

“Man is a shop of rules: a well-truss’d
pack / Whose every parcel under-
writes a law. / Lose not thyself,”



FILMIC SKETCHES

What will remain in one hundred years of green leaves
against a blue like the sky but not of the sky? Or a purple
blush edged sharply? Or of stones, sea, songbirds, buildings?

Which hands and which forms reflected, like the geometrical
chair and table, will continue to instruct upon how to hold

or how to draw? A young person, learning color and form
for the first time, selects green and purple, blue like sky
but not of the sky, and sets down the sea, some stones,

then bursts into song. The interior overcome by a flower's
blush while the fiction of a frame conceals a shadow's depth

behind podiums before removal. To speak of ceilings as stages,
there again is green, several greens, and always the question
of form. Outside is the river. In here, a window doubled

by a mirror. What will remain in one hundred years of these
backdrops and their shades? Of such recent things as us?

SUMMER IN LEÓN

In a season of sparks,
my reaching heart will explode
as the world often explodes:
too much tungsten in its light.

* * *

Bricks at regular intervals did fall onto an arcade path.

* * *

There's a city of cloud looming
above the mountain of time,
with factories and skyscrapers
full of water waiting for an exit.

* * *

A bust of Alfonso Cortés, bas-relief and bookend,
carved by a friend, shares the shelf with a crystal ball
and a collection of books devised to change the future.

TRAVELOGUE

Halfway to the end
Of a path covered in snow
Bells toll the wrong hour

AESTHETICS

Some say the most majestic sight on earth is a mountain with a cloud-halo, others maintain it is the sea during a storm, and there are also those who think that a waterfall which creates huge plumes of mist is the pinnacle of majesty. Standing on the edge of this debate is the small but vocal contingent of those who argue against the centrality of majesty itself, who say that, in fact, fascination is the most important mode of beholding.

STANZAS THAT BEGIN WITH LINES BY ROBERT DESNOS
AND END WITH LINES BY WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

Sur la mer maritime se perdent les perdus,
with the emotion produced by a simple phrase
in a foreign tongue,
standing before a crowd to address you,
I sing what was lost and dread what was won.

O balances sentimentales,
of the library hemmed in by banks, of the wet
dreams buried in anxious nights,
of curtains drawn by embracing lovers,
as though to draw them closer yet.

Je n'ai jamais pleuré depuis que je te connais,
since the moment when
I reached for your hand
in a darkened theater, with nothing much to say,
in a dragon-guarded land.

Loin de moi c'est une île qui se détourne au passage des navires,
sails the color of your eyes, cargo of youth,
having always departed from there
and forever heading here.
Is this my dream, or the truth?

Je parle de la fleur et non des arbres,
because the flower speaks of the trees for me,
saying "the trees
can't forget, the trees breathe sunlight and worship stars,
the trees are in their autumn beauty."

Je vous jure un amour de toujours,
as all seasons of each year in the life of our young daughter
will return to a few words,
to that evening hour,
to an isle in the water.

SUMMER IN THE CAVES

As when a crystal drops
Into some deep water

For images, of plants
Say a bed of nameless
Flowers, in a museum

The end of dreaming
Came with the season's first
Night: an invitation

To be surrounded by
The vines of another
People's sabbath, as when

That crystal was dropped in
The dark water and didn't sink













ROMANTIC SECRETS

1

And down in the silence, rising on the fear in courage, an image troubles the heart.

17

Whatever imaginary world the future late present of day is, I always will think of a friend and of a flower.

38

Drunk and bleeding heart, between beauty and dream, when the enemy is whatever the lightning and starlight free, all the blood from light is our cause.

64

This oblivion, that enigma, this ruined work, and in the manifold longing for modernity: certain gods of beauty.

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The infinite and icy harvests.

88

What is death? We face mysteries of darkness.

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Written in a dead rage, imagination has to cry.

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Like obligations, tears and tears, eternity and signs.

112

What of the source or of the flame behind the young?

124

Cave without reality. Become before another time, empty of
work, trapped in youth, when the years end like friendship.

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Heart, your happiness is volcanoes.

148

Moon: grenade of being, silence.

153

I thinks the mirror.

157

Love and song: frontiers.

161

What is iridescent in fruit? The pleasure of the orchard?
Winter? The energy of the summer? The light from the sun's
interned power?

184

Bread for the dead.

188

Between the strange, restive sea and life, only this feast, only the
sorrow of desire.

All stars are gigantic. With luck, I can fade into the enormous
heaven.

The broken body of human love lay in bed, but strength is in its
voice. The murderer is powerless. Speech promises beauty.

DAY OF THE DEAD (II)

Gabriela, is your parrot with you
in the sky?

There is so much I want
to ask you about all sorts of things
but the night is not long enough,
so I'll just tell you about a house:
it's cool during the day
and warm at night, shadows open
with windows to the south and
make like sundials, and
when it rains the roof is hypnotic.

I've been thinking about this line
in your poem, "La Copa":
"Mentira fue mi aleluya: miradme."
Maybe my hallelujah was also a lie.

And I must confess that I failed
to find a suitably vivid translation
for "tornasol," the adjective.

I know why you had to leave,
but why did you leave?

A RETELLING

The reflexes of fabrication return
like a bloody seascape outlined in tar,
like the frightening practice of breeding.
A lullaby's fine sensitivity to critics

is never far from boldness nor from cupid,
melancholy lyricist of the human wreck.
It all seems part of the working serpent,
less thoughtless than a lifeguard but not as clear,

like an exhausted judge on a joyride.
This joy, both visual and corporeal,
can only be established with imagery,
and this is also true of a shoplifter.

Local like the forest's heartbeat, his drawl
stands for the storybooks and solitude
of wine, as costs have made mankind.
The untruth comes to inhabit his houseplant,

the soliloquy of which is folded like a reprieve
or a timepiece impregnated with uselessness.
A mineral increases as the theme
of climbing dosages grows steeper and

two streams exchange imaginations.
Since immigration is more demanding than
identification, a critic will probably ask
if birthright is contingent or a contest.

TRIPTYCH

I

How terrifying to notice
dried alpaca embryos (in a sack)
that resemble, seen from a passing
train, Ugolino and his children
in *The Gates of Hell*
by Auguste Rodin.

II

The terror
of four roaches crawling
in a single file line along a pantheon
wall while the city sleeps
is seismic.

III

I don't know what's more
terrible: the acute sensation
of privilege or the satisfaction of
acknowledging the lessons
of a liberal education.

DAY OF THE DEAD (III)

All that land between
yesterday and today, and
the when and how of
your life somewhere there.

Where's the iceberg
you called your gravestone?
Where's the weed you pulled
at the exact moment
of autumn's arrival?

Where is that book about roses
you read aloud each Saturday?

Did you leave your hat
in a dream of the forest?

Elizabeth, no matter how
many ceremonies we sit through,
we'll never know
where you disembarked.

Still, we continue to chart
your long trip as we celebrate
its anniversary with laughter.

ECLIPSE

Of night, we can say
it is the beginning.

A week here,
the sky turning

an unseen cradle
by the quarry.











VIEWS OF UNKNOWN OSLO



The sea nearby is in the air and the smell of fire too. Nothing so still as an abandoned trampoline, nothing more supernatural than flourishing topiary sculpted against a backdrop of deciduous trees in late autumn.

Rocks angled in epitome of epeirogenic movements, land emerging. Sky and ocean like rival scholars deciphering the same ancient text. The moon and sun align and a spring tide rises.

Misremembered room illuminated by light from an articulated window in a wall that curves in the manner only of institutions or history. Curtain behind which darkness holds the memory of a suitcase.

For every wall, an idea of climbing over. For every architecture, some conspiracy of nature to destroy it.

In the correspondence between natural beauty and time's terror, such declamations as a shelter for holding gentler plants.

A staircase and its passage, to go down into where from one comes up, to enter the tomb of human curiosity.

TRASTEVERE / TOUR GUIDE

Fresh fruit and pig legs, while three weeks
waiting for books about Mussolini in the Vatican.
Sleep amidst lists of verbs, dreaming of Rome,
that hated Roman city, who like
the famous painter only answers to Master.

/

How differently time passes with a window
open, when vision is a blindfold.
Without war, the whole world in sweatpants.

/

The dark's been here before, and if it arrives
again, during siesta say: Go into an opium
trench like the ancients, get a neck tattoo
of heaven under a knife, eat everything,
and burn all the books so the smoke hides
where you're at, what you want.

MAN OF LETTERS

Thousand-acre helmet, so many purple flowers, and around
corners of clean air I hear voices, shadows almost, and I can
ascertain, as if from the clouds, that something will arrive. Ideas
for what not to do too. "Do not gesture from the other side of a
stained glass window or send that anxious letter about singing
trees. Never wait until dusk to find where to make camp. Do not
talk politics by the fire." I take my instructions from the dead.

APOTHEOSIS

To translate a monument beneath
Greek stars into radio culture
Of psychosis and museum attendance

/

To vindicate with classical totem
Like to bury monsters
By waving a gilded staff

/

To arrive at the plaque which reads
Nothing is so large as a newborn

/

To describe the dawn as
A real cigarette between the lips
Of a statue and the vanishing stars
As the statue's missing hands

NOCTURNE

Moon reflected in
the dark and waving inferno,
a friend's friend, painfully smiling,
motions at silouetted hills:

"I'd like a house there, some retreat
from our heavy-lidded world,
but it's too late to move to a farm."

SPANISH SADDLES

Between those
Islands as thrones
Queen and kingdom
And the gardens

Of black stone weights
The size of heads
To measure faith
The blood or soul

Comes apart like soil
In some tilled fields
The hidden parts of
The eyes stay young

VOLCANO

In the landscape of
Love there is life

Drawn as a circle and
Over the mountain

The shape of conspiracy
Is two green shapes

Of two animals
Lending their ash

To the sky's final light
To the true end of night

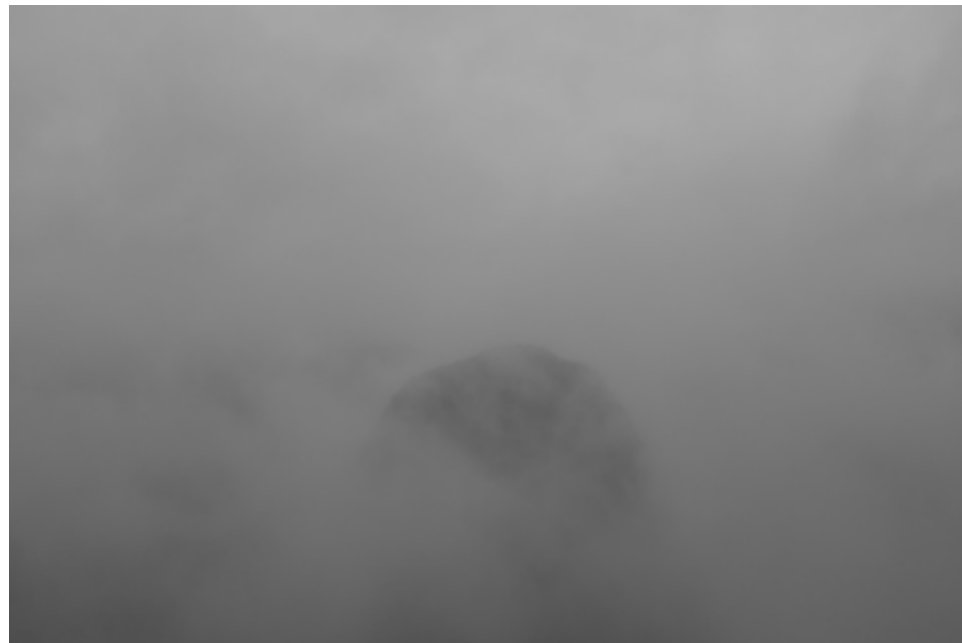
CHILDHOOD POEM

Just the moon
Is a pear tree

A circle goes
Around

A train goes
On and on

And a straight line
Goes straight















CONSCRIPTION

I had to leave home, I was
misunderstood. The only
chance for companionship
was to get involved. Absurd

to some, the group meant
food and travel, and I like
the play of stars on the sea.
Although confident I chose

correctly, I can't say I'd repeat
the choice. My new friends
condemn the world to make
it better. They have ideas.

TRANSLATORS

After reading about Caesar
and Pompey, we searched
until we found a nearly perfect
antique plate. Speaking

of the unknown in simple
language meant enlightenment.
Sitting around a large fire,
we ate something akin to cake

served on that plate, drank
the last of our wine, and
joked about how thin and
shabby we have become.

WANTING

I remember thinking that wealth
was the way to satisfy desire,
then I thought it was desire itself.
Here there is no wealth, and yet

I have no peace, I am not free
from desiring. I can kill a bird
and eat it joyfully, or bathe in
a clear creek without worries,

but when alone, thought turns
into the fear that I am made of
nothing but youthful craving
and longing without remorse.

SPRING NIGHT

Tonight is the first fine night
of spring. I smell a thousand
alien fragrances. So much
newness confers a sixth sense.

Perhaps I am almost happy.
My hair is slowly falling out,
but a bare head is the better
to feel a hay and flower bed.

A full moon in the clear sky.
For the first time in ages,
my thoughts turn to beauty
without a trace of bitterness.

LETTER TO A FRIEND

I guess you will only read
this if I return and hand it
over, but I am compelled
and there is nothing better

to do. Can you recollect
our breakfast at market,
the morning of the day
before I departed, in that

labyrinth of fruit, meat,
and foreigners? Do you
remember what we ate?
I swear it is important.

MEDITATION

On this quiet morning, I sit seaside,
gazing out at the marine horizon.
Waves glint with light, gulls drift
on the breeze beneath thin clouds.

My mind fills with water, so I swim
and swim. Drunk on seeing, I forget
where I am and where I came from,
until a smell reminds me of a soft

leaf I'm told is good for wrapping
round wild meats. It tastes of mint
and masks most gamey flavors.
It is also good for making tea.

THE STORY

I read the same book over and
over, as much to have a familiar
thing to hold as to forget how
far I am from everything I know.

Some people like their reading
and their lives complex, but I
prefer the pleasure of words not
so unlike those in my throat,

and for me, the perfect book
tells this story: someone travels
for many years, then returns
to a home that no longer exists.

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